Eastern Illinois University
The Keep

Masters Theses | Student Theses & Publications

1982

A Room of One's Own: The Women's Room

Lou Ellen Crawford
Eastern Illinois University

This research is a product of the graduate program in English at Eastern Illinois University. Find out more about the program.

Recommended Citation
Crawford, Lou Ellen, "A Room of One's Own: The Women's Room" (1982). *Masters Theses*. 2945.
https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/2945

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses & Publications at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

THESIS REPRODUCTION CERTIFICATE

TO: Graduate Degree Candidates who have written formal theses.

SUBJECT: Permission to reproduce theses.

The University Library is receiving a number of requests from other institutions asking permission to reproduce dissertations for inclusion in their library holdings. Although no copyright laws are involved, we feel that professional courtesy demands that permission be obtained from the author before we allow theses to be copied.

Please sign one of the following statements:

Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University has my permission to lend my thesis to a reputable college or university for the purpose of copying it for inclusion in that institution's library or research holdings.

October 20, 1982

Date

Lou Ellen Crawford

Author

I respectfully request Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University not allow my thesis be reproduced because _____

_____

_____

_____ _____

Date Author

m

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN—THE WOMEN'S ROOM

(TITLE)

BY

LOU ELLEN CRAWFORD

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1982
YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

11-1-82
DATE

ADVISER

11-1-82
DATE

COMMITTEE MEMBER

DATE

COMMITTEE MEMBER

11/2/82
DATE

DEPARTMENT CHAIRPERSON

EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN—WOMEN'S ROOM

Abstract of

A Thesis Submitted in
Completion of the Requirement
For the Degree of
Master of Arts

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY
LOU ELLEN CRAWFORD

Charleston, Illinois

October, 1982

522302

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN—THE WOMEN'S ROOM

Abstract

The recent resurgence of feminism has been accompanied by the development of feminist fiction. Identifying those characteristics by which feminist fiction adds to the American novel a new and valid perspective, feminist criticism has also flourished. Feminist critics agree that fiction with a new perspective demands critical evaluation from that same perspective; and Cheri Register provides a concise, thorough list of five elements which comprise effective feminist fiction. Of Register's five criteria, Carol Heilbrun stresses the equalizing, conciliatory influence of androgyny. Recent feminist authors have written many novels which perform one or more of the functions prescribed by Register. Three authors, Alix Kates Shulman, Lisa Alther, and Marilyn French, have each published two feminist novels during the last decade. With Register's criteria serving as a guideline, the comparison/contrast of each novelist's more recent work with the previous novel highlights developments in feminist fiction.

In her earlier novel, Memoirs of An Ex-Prom Queen, Shulman focuses on the need for consciousness-raising and providing a literary forum for women. Burning Questions, a more overtly political novel than Memoirs, presents an idea central not only to the Women's Liberation Movement, but especially to the earlier feminist novels, Speaking Bitterness. Following the example of the revolutionary Chinese peasants, the protagonist Zane and her Third Street Circle feminist group derive strength from the catharsis of speaking freely with other women of the oppression in their daily lives.

Alther's novel Kin-Flicks meets each of Register's five standards for feminist-approved fiction, stressing especially woman's sense of sisterhood.

Kin-Flicks is androgynous in detailing woman's life through the relationship of Ginny Babcock Bliss, the protagonist and her mother. In Original Sins, androgyny is achieved. Black culture is examined; Women's Liberation is scrutinized. Traditional male attitudes are demonstrated to be a disadvantage, limiting and narrowing man's existence as well as woman's.

French creates in The Women's Room an effective forum for consciousness-raising. The telling of the suburban housewife's story supplements traditional male fiction; and as a student and career woman, Mira, as protagonist, provides a positive, if not joyous, role model. The Bleeding Heart represents a logical progression from The Women's Room. Its protagonist, Dolores, is in many ways similar to Mira. Dolores is, however, from the beginning a role model immersed in work of her own. By developing Dolores' relationship with Victor, French presents a forum for both male and female, thus progressing toward androgyny.

Critics responded to the interest in feminist fiction by proposing various criteria to be met by feminist authors. Register's list of criteria takes into account the social and political background which nurtured feminist fiction. More recent novels like Original Sins and The Bleeding Heart meet Register's standards; however, because these novels view male needs as equally pressing, they represent, perhaps, the beginning of the androgynous fiction forecast by Heilbrun.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Lacking a literary tradition of their own, women have traditionally accepted those female role models and characterizations of women presented by male writers. However, the recent resurgence of feminism has been accompanied by the development of feminist fiction. In such fiction, feminist authors recall their prior dependence on literature by men. Speaking through protagonist Isadora Wing, Erica Jong states, "Lady Chatterley was really a man."[1] She continues:

> I learned about women from men. I saw them through the eyes of male writers. Of course, I didn't think of them as male writers. I thought of them as writers, as authorities, as gods who knew and were to be trusted completely.
>
> Naturally I trusted everything they said, even when it implied my own inferiority. I learned what an orgasm was from D.H. Lawrence, disguised as Lady Chatterley. I learned from men that all women worship "the Phallos"—as he so quaintly spelled it. I learned from Shaw that women never can be artists; I learned from Dostoyevsky that they have no religious feeling; I learned from Swift and Pope that they have too much religious feeling (and therefore can never be quite rational); I learned from Faulkner that they are earth mothers and at one with the moon and the tides and the crops; I learned from Freud that they have deficient superegos and are ever "incomplete" because they lack the one thing in this world worth having: a penis.[2]

In The Women's Room, Marilyn French's character echoes Isadora's dissatisfaction with the image of women in traditional male literature, lamenting:

> . . . the assumption that men are the ones who matter, and that the women exist only in relation to them, which is so silent and under-running that even we never picked it up until recently. But after all, look at what we read.[3]

---

[1]Erica Jong, Fear of Flying (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973; Signet, 1974), p. 24.

[2]Ibid., p. 154.

[3]Marilyn French, The Women's Room, (Summit Books, 1977; Jove/HBJ, 1978), pp. 289-90.

Those women who did venture to write found their subject matter limited by practical considerations; "they dared not offend their meal tickets with too much honesty, and sexuality of course was the top taboo."[4] Unsatisfied by existing fiction and frustrated in the search for a female literary tradition, women writers of the 1960's, 70's and 80's responded by creating their own fiction, the feminist novel.

---

[4]Elizabeth Peer, "Sex and the Woman Writer," Newsweek, May 5, 1975, pp. 70-71.

I. FEMINIST FICTION/FEMINIST CRITICISM

As the number of novels written from a female viewpoint increased, critics have realized that a new literature is "stirring to wrench the image of women from male hands,"[5] and they have struggled to discern those characteristics which render it a new fiction.

An immediately apparent aspect of feminist fiction is the recurrence of bitter, angry, or lustful thoughts, previously believed inappropriate for feminine expression. Elizabeth Peer describes the new feminist novel for Newsweek as

> packed with rage, pain, irony, humor and deep-focus pictures of the way women live now. Fleshing out the political polemics of Betty Friedan, Kate Millett and Germaine Greer, these novelists are the map-makers of the new female consciousness, sending back first-hand reports of the real—and hitherto unmentionable—terrain of female experience.[6]

Erica Jong also notes that, in recent feminist fiction, women writers have begun to vent sentiments of rage and sexuality more freely.[7] While she agrees that the open expression of bitterness and sexuality in fiction by women is of recent origin, Anne Mickelson emphasizes the new self-awareness of female characters which has replaced the traditional definition of woman through her function in home and community.[8] As feminist novelists share emotions considered improper for a lady, they begin to redefine woman.

Although the sense of emotional freedom and individual worth is a vital aspect of the feminist novel, its most distinguishing characteristic is the

---

[5]Peer, p. 70.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Erica Jong, "Writing as a Woman," Bookviews, August, 1978, p. 21.

[8]Anne Z. Mickelson, Reaching Out: Sensitivity and Order in Recent American Fiction by Women (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1979) pp. 2-3, 8.

development of woman's viewpoint. Janeway emphasizes that women's literature is separate from, rather than supplemental to, traditional male-oriented literature, being derived from a perspective either overlooked or dismissed by men as alien or inaccessible.[9] Thus, the development of feminist fiction has added to the American novel a new and equally valid dimension.

Three distinguishing characteristics separate feminist fiction from its male counterpart. Authors of the new feminist fiction run the gamut of female emotion, no longer bridled by the requirement that women behave appropriately. In it, a woman is defined as a person rather than as a wife or mother. The most important feature of feminist fiction, however, is its authentic new perspective.

As a literature different and separate from traditional male fiction, feminist fiction cannot appropriately be subjected to traditional criticism. With the growth of this new fiction, a criticism unique to it has also flourished. While Elizabeth Janeway observes the growing respectability of feminist fiction, Annis Pratt discusses the concomitant development of the new feminist criticism and the inherent difficulties of determining its proper scope. Pratt proposes an archetypal mode of feminist criticism, for the purpose of delineating "the proper psycho-mythical development of the female individual in literature."[10] Lillian S. Robinson, a more radical feminist critic, takes issue with Pratt's modes of criticism, insisting that "To be effective, feminist criticism cannot become simply bourgeois criticism in drag. It must be ideological and moral criticsm; it must

---

[9]Elizabeth Janeway, "Women's Literature," in Harvard Guide to Contemporary Writing, ed. Daniel Hoffman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1979), pp. 342-45.

[10]Annis Pratt, "The New Feminist Criticism," College English 32 (May 1971), pp. 872, 877.

be revolutionary."[11] Nina Auerbach, too, stresses the political and moral nature of feminist fiction and criticism in the future as well as the present.[12] Marcia Holly emphasizes the importance of feminist fiction and criticism as an equalizing factor, balancing the biased masculine "view of humanity and reality. We are questioning and analyzing the depictions of women and the treatment of women's lives in literature."[13] In an essay entitled "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction," Cheri Register, too, points out the bias of traditional "phallic criticism."[14] Despite differences in politics and critical approach, female critics agree that fiction with a new perspective demands critical evaluation from that same perspective.

Abandoning male-oriented standards, Cheri Register provides the most complete list of elements comprising effective feminist fiction. Like Robinson, Auerbach and Holly, Register also finds it fundamental for criticism of feminist fiction to consider the culture out of which such fiction developed.[15] Register describes feminist criticism as "prescriptive criticism that attempts to set standards for literature that is 'good' from a feminist viewpoint, prescriptive in that it implies a need for new literature that meets its standards."[16] Having

---

[11]Lillian S. Robinson, "Dwelling in Decencies: Radical Criticism and the Feminist Perspective," College English 32 (May 1971), p. 879.

[12]Nina Auerbach, "Feminist Criticism Reviewed," in Gender and Literary Voice, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980), p. 260.

[13]Marcia Holly, "Consciousness and Authenticity: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic," in Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory, ed. Josephine Donovan (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975), p. 42.

[14]Cheri Register, "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction," in Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory, ed. Josephine Donovan (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975), pp. 13, 18.

[15]Ibid., p. 2.

[16]Ibid., p. 2.

thus cited the need for new standards by which to define and judge feminist fiction, Register proposes these five criteria:

> To earn feminist approval, literature must . . . (1) serve as a forum for women; (2) help to achieve cultural androgyny; (3) provide role models; (4) promote sisterhood; and (5) augment consciousness-raising.[17]

She describes the "ideal feminist fictional work" as

> one that fulfills all five functions in equilibrium. Rather than being driven to mental breakdown or suicide or immobility, the heroines of new feminist fiction will somehow manage to resist destruction, perhaps with the support and confidence of other women. Their outlook and behaviour will presage a new social order that integrates the best aspect of "female culture" with selected "male" values.[18]

Register insists upon authenticity, emphasizing this quality in her explanation of each goal she establishes for feminist-approved fiction.

For example, if feminist fiction is to effectively serve as a forum for women, it must be believable. Register observes that a technique useful to feminist writers is reliance upon lived experience.[19] The combination of autobiography with art in feminist fiction produces an authentic forum for women.

Register seems to view her second criterion, cultural androgyny, as a result of the first. She explains,

> Once literature begins to serve as a forum illuminating female experience, it can assist in humanizing and equilibrating the culture's value system, which has historically served predominantly male interests. That is, it can help to bring about <u>cultural androgyny</u>.[20]

The term cultural androgyny implies an equality of male and female strengthened by the existence of literary forums expressing both viewpoints.

---

[17]Register, pp. 12, 19.

[18]Ibid., p. 24.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid., pp. 19-20.

The third quality Register looks for in effective feminist fiction is the presentation of positive role models for women. In the establishment of role models, Register again demands plausibility and authenticity: "the author need only describe the problems and offer some solutions, if the character herself can find them."[21] The creation of believable role models for women is a vital facet of a literature seeking to bring about androgyny.

The depiction of credible female roles, in turn, promotes Register's fourth qualification, a sense of sisterhood among women. Register quotes Susan Koppelman Cornillon's explanation of the function and power of literature in developing sisterhood:

> We are all aware of the agony of adolescence in our culture, the evasive fumblings as we attempt to communicate about our fears and our needs and our anxieties without ever actually mentioning to anyone what they really are: the creation of elaborate private symbologies that enable us to grieve about our pimples, our sexual fantasies, our masturbation, the strange changes happening to our bodies. But boys outgrow this secretiveness soon—because there is a vast wealth of literature for them to stumble on, both great and popular, classical and contemporary, pious and lewd, that assures them that, indeed, they are normal. Or even better, their suffering is portrayed as prerequisite for maturity, if not a prelude to greatness.[22]

Feminist fiction should, according to Register, assist the feminist movement in striving to create an atmosphere of community and sisterhood, like that available to the American male.

Cheri Register also sees the need for feminist-approved fiction to foster consciousness-raising as an integration of personal and political issues. Register explains that, while fiction can provide the most effective forum for discovery

---

[21]Register, pp. 21-24.

[22]Susan Koppleman Cornillon, "The Fiction of Fiction," Images of Women in Fiction, quoted by Cheri Register, "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction." In Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory, ed. Josephine Donovan (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975), p. 22.

and sharing of the internalized psychological aspects of sexism, more overtly political issues receive media coverage or the scrutiny of investigative committees. Thus, although social questions are proper topics for feminist fiction, the main thrust of consciousness-raising must be authentic, subjective and personal.[23]

Other critics emphasize to varying degrees one or more of Register's requirements for feminist-approved fiction. For example, Elizabeth Janeway also believes that women's literature can act as forum, expanding by the addition of female experience that which is presently considered universal.[24] Janeway echoes Register in emphasizing that, if feminist fiction is to provide a suitable forum, it must be authentic, or recognizable; both critics also note that the commingling of autobiography with fiction is, for female writers, an innovation utilized in such fiction to achieve authenticity.[25] In her book Toward a Recognition of Androgyny, Carol Heilbrun expresses her belief that "women have only recently learned to tell the truth, first to one another and then to themselves." As forum, current feminist fiction is frequently confessional, or autobiographical in nature.[26]

Regarding Register's second criterion, Heilbrun recommends androgyny as an ideal reconciling male and female, freeing both from the constriction of customary or appropriate sexual roles.[27] The equalizing effect of androgynous

---

[23]Register, p. 23.

[24]Janeway, p. 344.

[25]Register, pp. 12, 19; Janeway, p. 347.

[26]Carolyn Heilbrun, Toward a Recognition of Androgyny, (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1967; New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1982), pp. 170-71.

[27]Heilbrun, Introduction to Toward a Recognition of Androgyny, pp. x-xi.

themes is, according to Marcia Holly, a prerequisite to realism in fiction.[28] Progression toward androgyny is characterized by Elizabeth Janeway as the abandonment of values imposed upon women in favor of:

> A new set of values that will suit the lives and purposes of women as seen by women: a system of authentic emotional relations and interconnected beliefs drawn from lived experience that will develop the force of social myth, and thus explain the workings of the world and direct appropriate behavior.[29]

Other critics also consider the subject of role models, Register's third standard for feminist-approved fiction. While Anne Mickelson stresses the need to redefine both male and female roles, [30] Dolores Barracano Schmitt is concerned with rectification of the negative image of women traditionally put forth by male writers, "the Great American Bitch."[31] Again, she stresses authenticity. The consensus of critical opinion is that new, positive and realistic female role models are needed.

Register's last two requirements, the sense of sisterhood and consciousness-raising content, are more political in nature. Marcia Holly regards consciousness-raising as a process of re-education of and about women which, in the realm of literature, must be followed by accurate criticism of feminist fiction.[32] While Register prescribes consciousness-raising as a standard by which to measure feminist fiction, Holly maintains that criticism, too, must have its consciousness raised in order to fairly examine the new fiction by women. The emphasis

---

[28] Holly, p. 44.

[29] Janeway, p. 376.

[30] Mickelson, pp. 2, 3.

[31] Dolores Barracano Schmitt, "The Great American Bitch," College English 32 (May 1971), p. 905.

[32] Holly, p. 40.

placed on each criterion of effective feminist fiction varies from scholar to scholar.

On the subject of authentic female writing, Virginia Woolf speculated that, "if women ever stopped politely acting out the roles imposed by men and began telling the truth, civilization would shudder to a halt."[33] The flourishing of feminist fiction in recent years has indeed caused the male population to shudder; civilization has at least paused to reconsider the role of woman. Female authors have written many novels which perform to varying degrees one or more of Register's prescribed functions. Three authors, Alix Kates Shulman, Lisa Alther, and Marilyn French have each published two feminist novels during the last decade, a time when feminist fiction and criticism have developed in symbiosis. The Shulman novels considered here are: Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen (1972) and Burning Questions (1978). Lisa Alther's two novels are Kin-Flicks (1975) and Original Sins (1981); Marilyn French has written The Women's Room (1977) and The Bleeding Heart (1980). In addition to being widely-read, each author is representative of a large group of feminist writers: Shulman is Jewish; Alther is Southern; and French presents an academic viewpoint, as well as the viewpoint of the older woman. The comparison/contrast of each novelist's more recent work with the previous will highlight developments in feminist fiction. Register's criteria provide the most concise, thorough synthesis of critical opinion and therefore serves as a guideline. Androgyny results when Register's other criteria are met. In her book, Toward A Recognition of Androgyny, Carol Heilbrun examines the equalizing, conciliatory effect of androgyny; and recent feminist fiction has, indeed, expanded to include sympathetic characters of both sexes. Applying Register's critical standards to these six novels demonstrates the extent

---

[33]Peer, p. 70.

to which each of the novels performs the five prescribed functions of feminist fiction. Also evident is the fact that, in accordance with critical recommendation, the two most recent novels, The Bleeding Heart (1980) and Original Sins (1981), represent a move toward the ideal of androgyny.

II. ALIX KATES SHULMAN

Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen

Shulman's first novel, Memoirs of An Ex-Prom Queen, does perform the function of consciousness-raising, through narrator and protagonist Sasha Davis, who, at age thirty, views her life of suburban motherhood as "the fulfillment of a curse."[34] Memoirs functions of consciousness-raising and feminist forum cannot be fully separated, because at this early period the frank discussion of woman's discontent was a task of consciousness-raising. Also as a part of consciousness-raising, Sasha reveals the conspiratorial techniques which, she now realizes, condition little girls for marriage and motherhood. The memoir begins with her initial awareness of masculine and feminine, in first grade, where the female teacher concurred that it was wiser for the girls to spend recess huddled near the school buildings than to venture onto the playground to be bullied by the little boys.[35] Sasha remembers that, in adolescence, she and her friends were tutored in the art of packaging and marketing themselves, so as to obtain successful husbands. As guidelines, encouraging aunts and mothers thoughtfully purchased Boy Meets Girl, Junior Miss, Girl Alive, and subscriptions to Seventeen magazine.[36] Sasha explains in her memoir that both sexes are duped by early training; "boys are taught that it is weak to need a woman, as girls are taught that it is their strength to win a man."[37] Sasha's next admission in the line of consciousness-raising is her reluctance to marry:

---

[34]Alix Kates Shulman, Memoirs of An Ex-Prom Queen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1972; Bantam Books, 1973), p. 285.

[35]Ibid., pp. 18-19.

[36]Ibid., p. 74.

[37]Ibid., p. 40-41.

> I hadn't really wanted to marry at all. I wanted to make something of myself, not just give it away. But I knew if I didn't marry, I would be sorry. Only freaks didn't. I knew I had to do it quickly, too, while there was still a decent selection to chose from. . . . The best catches were being picked off while I was educating myself right out of the running.[38]

Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope describe the attitude handed down by Sasha's mother as "the Cinderella myth," the belief that "beauty, passivity, and a degree of helpless suffering will get a rich man, and, with him, automatic security and happiness."[39] Thus trained, Sasha feels guilty because of her dissatisfaction.[40] Demonstrating the girlhood conditioning which molds Sasha into the miserable thirty-year-old wife and mother of two, Shulman uses Memoirs as a tool for consciousness-raising.

Closely related to the consciousness-raising content of Memoirs is its stance as forum. In the Introduction, narrator Sasha describes her purpose in writing: "To share what I've learned (and to have something interesting to do now that I am past thirty and the children are in school), I shall compose a memoir."[41] Sasha shares in her memoir marital problems she had previously internalized, in fear of seeming petty. She verbalizes the sense of vulnerability which plagues her as Will becomes less and less punctual in his daily return from the office;

---

[38]Shulman, Memoirs, p. 174.

[39]Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope, The Female Hero in British and American Literature (New York: R.R. Bowker Company, 1981), p. 108.

[40]Ibid., p. 109.

[41]Shulman, Memoirs, p. vii.

Whatever time t he said he'd show, he showed at t + x.

. . .

No way for me to calculate x without being small-minded. No possibility of retribution. For every x, the salad would be wilted, the entree spoiled, the children ready for bed or asleep. Complaints too mean to voice.[42]

As a forum for women, Memoirs dwells on the absolute vulnerability which accompanies motherhood. Overwhelmed, Sasha realizes the need for openness; "The conspiracy of silence about motherhood was even wider than the one about sex. . . . Why didn't the women speak? Evidently they were too busy."[43] Shulman breaks the silence by speaking through Sasha, providing a forum for women.

The existence of a forum for women is a prerequisite for Cheri Register's critical standard of achieving androgyny. As a memoir, Shulman's novel supplements traditional literature by the addition of woman's viewpoint. In the gory details so detested by male readers, Sasha experiences the menarche. (Cecile Shapiro points out in Bookviews that "unexpected menstrual gushing" is a common occurrence both in real life and in the feminist novel.)[44] Also supplementary to the male viewpoint is Sasha's reminiscence of her disappointing defloration. She recalls having surrendered to steady boyfriend and football captain, Joey, the night she was crowned prom queen; "Watching him move up and down on me in the darkness I wondered: is this all there is to it?"[45] On the subject of

---

[42]Shulman, Memoirs, p. 274.

[43]Ibid., p. 254.

[44]Cecile Shapiro, "What Women Want: A Novel Answer to Freud," Bookviews, August 1978, p. 28.

[45]Shulman Memoirs, p. 68.

rape, Shulman again presents woman's side of the issue through Sasha. Struggling with her date and co-worker, Jan, who has suddenly turned menacing, Sasha ponders:

> In flat Ohio they drive you fifteen miles out into the country; in the Adirondacks they take you up four thousand feet. In either case, once they turn off their motors and the lights, it is very hard for you to get back home. . . . If Candide had been born a girl, would he too in the best of worlds have wound up being ravished on a mountaintop?[46]

Although Sasha's tears and plea of virginity distract Jan so that he ignites motor and headlights and takes her home, the incident causes her to lose her first job and retreat to her parents' home. Shapiro observes that preoccupation with the dangers of (heterosexual) rape is "a threat that is an obsessive concern (though often muted) which keeps reappearing in fiction by women.[47] Male authors glory in tales of sexual conquest; novelists like Shulman demonstrate that woman is victimized, whether she must submit to a stranger, fend off an insistent date, or merely exist in constant awareness of the danger of falling prey. Because of Memoirs' early publication date, in relation to feminist fiction, Shulman's detailed discussion of woman's side of sexual issues was innovative and represents a move toward androgyny.

Cheri Register also believes that feminist-approved fiction helps develop a sense of sisterhood. In Memoirs, Sasha's close friendship with Roxanne DuBois demonstrates this ideal. Lonely and outcast, the two sustain each other through college years into adulthood. When she feels trapped in her marriage to Frank, Sasha telephones Roxanne, now married to a West Point-er who impregnated her on their first date. Also unhappily married, Roxanne describes herself as a saboteur; and she has carefully categorized her acts of marital "attrition"; she

---

[46]Shulman, Memoirs, pp. 110-11.

[47]Shapiro, p. 29.

is garrulous during crucial moments of baseball telecasts, clumsy when she seasons the scrambled eggs, and inept when she pairs his dress socks.[48] Drowning in motherhood, Sasha turns to Roxanne for solace. Sasha has her long hair cut and styled in her former prom queen bouffant, hoping to rekindle husband Will's romantic longings. When this desperate measure falls short, Sasha's reaction, on the last page of the novel, is to telephone Roxanne. In her portrayal of these female friends who comfort, cheer and strengthen each other, Shulman's provides in Memoirs a sense of sorority.

Regarding positive role models, another of Register's requirements, the early publication of Memoirs must again be taken into consideration. Sasha recognizes and admits her discontent with the limitations of the roles for which she has received life-long training, wife and mother. She is, however, unable to resolve her dilemma. Register demands authenticity in the meeting of each standard; solutions proposed must be consistent with the character. The fact that Sasha has carefully analyzed her unhappy situation makes her, at this early stage of feminism and feminist fiction, a credible, positive role model.

Although Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen fulfills in varying degrees each of Register's requirements, Shulman focuses on the need for a forum and consciousness-raising. Consequently, she progresses toward androgyny in Memoirs by writing frankly about woman's experience. As protagonist, Sasha is a role model who openly admits her unhappiness but cannot resolve it; and Sasha has one female friend with whom she feels the camaraderie of sisterhood.

Burning Questions

Burning Questions is structured as a book within a book, with Zane IndiAnna commencing her memoir, My Life As a Rebel, immediately following the title

---

[48]Shulman, Memoirs, pp. 194-95.

page. Zane sets the tone of her work from the beginning, citing the revolutionary examples of Rose Luxemburg, Emma Goldman, Louise Michel, LaPasionaria, Angela Davis, Elizabeth Gurly Flynn, and Alexandra Kollontai.[49] Questions also meets the standards of Lillian Robinson, who insists that feminist fiction and criticism must be politically radical:

> The essential female relation to the means of production is embodied in women's traditional tasks in the home, housework, child-rearing, even supervision of housework and serving as hostess. We are used to borrowing sociological vocabulary and speaking of women's "role," but it is useful, first, to comprehend it materially. And it is vital to do so if we are to understand that vast body of literature in which female characters acquire, question, accept or modify their "roles," the social definition of woman.[50]

Burning Questions is a more overtly political novel than Memoirs of An Ex-Prom Queen; Zane actively seeks to bring about change, while Sasha languishes in wifely doldrums.

In addition to serving the revolutionary purpose described by Robinson, Questions acts a a forum for women, meeting Register's first requirement. In Questions, the forum is frequently revolutionary: a late-night phone call from her friend Kitty sends Zane off to attend her first Third Street Circle meeting of feminists, where she is exposed to an idea central not only to the Women's Liberation movement but especially to the earlier feminist novels. A woman named Faith is addressing the group:

> In China, during the revolution, the peasants were able to change their lives by examining their own personal, everyday experience of

---

[49]Alix Kates Shulman, Burning Questions (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1978; Bantam Books, 1979), pp. xiv, 59, 60.

[50]Robinson, p. 881.

> oppression. They got a lot of strength from talking about it and comparing stories—they call it Speaking Bitterness. We decided to try the same technique.[51]

In Speaking Bitterness, Zane presents some of the same issues as did Sasha. Zane discovered, as had Sasha on her first venture out on her own, that sexual favors were expected in return for male acceptance; even among the Beats: "They acted as if to belong they had only to open their notebooks; but we had to open our legs: for us art talk and scribbling were considered pretentious."[52] Both Sasha and Zane discuss the problems of family dinnertime, each concluding that it is simpler and more pleasant when only mother and children dine together. As forum, novels like Memoirs and Questions contain details of women's daily lives previously considered insignificant. A description of the young mother's daily, grueling schedule thus becomes a standard feature of the earlier feminist novels. Zane struggles each day to keep pace with the schedule she has charted and posted:

> My decreed day included the usual 6:30 awakening, meals, airings, naps and prescribed escortings to nursery school, to the doctor, to the playground and library. Like other conscientious mothers, I struggled to provide the necessities: adequate protein, calcium, B-complex, sleep, sensory stimulation, discipline, distraction, quiet moments and two stories per child at bedtime.[53]

The functions of providing a forum and consciousness raising are again intertwined, consciousness-raising being augmented through the technique of Speaking Bitterness. Zane demonstrates an awareness not to be found in Sasha's day, with her promise not to recount the "now familiar sad housewife tale the

---

[51]Shulman, Questions, pp. 233-34.

[52]Ibid., p. 89.

[53]Ibid., p. 166.

Women's Liberation movement bravely ripped the cover off."[54] Despite her possession of a raised consciousness, Zane, like Sasha, is unnerved by scrutinizing her existence as wife and mother:

> And now I had to admit that after everything I was still perfectly vulnerable. I had accepted the limitations of married life in exchange for its satisfactions, and still a black beard on a free spirit could move me; still a disenchanted husband could frighten me; still an unjust world could accuse me.[55]

The consciousness-raising content of Burning Questions differs from that of Memoirs of An Ex-Prom Queen. Questions reflects the influence of the Women's Liberation movement and the concomitant publication of novels like Memoirs which heightened public awareness of woman's dissatisfaction.

Questions also meets in a different manner the requirement that feminist-approved fiction develop a feeling of sisterhood. Sasha's friend Roxanne DuBois reappears in Questions, now divorced, struggling, and happier than in Memoirs. Zane's close friend is Kitty. Both Kitty and Zane are misfits among the playground mothers. Keeping the young mother's schedule, both stay awake late to enjoy the luxury of intellectual phone discussions, sometimes even selecting a formal topic to consider. Zane attends her first meeting of feminists at Kitty's insistence:

> "Quick, Zane," came her voice through the phone. "Turn on People's Radio. Some women are talking and they sound like us. Only instead of just two of them, there seems to be a whole group. And instead of just talking, they want to do something."[56]

Joining female activists brings one consequence unforeseen by Zane—she has an affair with Faith, the woman who had advocated the usefulness of Speaking Bitterness. Lesbianism is an aspect of feminism of which Zane had, of course, been vaguely aware:

---

[54]Shulman, Questions, p. 143.

[55]Ibid., pp. 189-90.

[56]Ibid., p. 277.

> Actually, even while I was walking rapidly across town toward East Third Street, arm linked in Faith's, I was still unprepared to fall in love with a woman. Like everyone in the movement in those days I'd thought about it abstractly, intellectually; had even sometimes desired it. The "gay-straight split" or what was now known in some circles as "the lesbian-separatist solution" was a question on which everyone was required to take a stand. It was always there, a fuse waiting to be lit, coming up when you least expected it, provoking our enemies, setting feminist against feminist, creating the first great schism in NOW, leaving no group unaffected.[57]

Shapiro points out that "lesbianism is another thread woven into the pattern of these fictions by women," using as an example from Burning Questions Morgan Moore, a chess player, writer and activist admired by Zane. While the main character of such a novel may have a lesbian affair, Shapiro observes that lesbianism is rarely adopted as her lifestyle.[58] Although Zane does not remain lesbian or separatist, she does continue to regard other women as sisters. Through Zane, Shulman develops a feeling of unity among women.

As women who wish to accomplish change, Zane, Kitty and the Third Street Circle provide female role models. In the sense of having realized her lot in life, Sasha served as a role model; Zane, however, furnishes a prototype who has continually striven to improve the situation of other women, as well as her own. Unlike Sasha, Zane is happy at the conclusion of her memoir. Cecile Shapiro cites Zane's example, explaining, "The novels with upbeat conclusions--yes, you could call them 'happy endings'—find their heroines involved with fruitful careers."[59] Zane and Ricky are divorced; Zane and Faith are friends, no longer lovers; and Zane is teaching "women's studies" courses. In accordance with Register's demand for authenticity, Shulman does not present Zane as a

---

[57]Shulman, Questions, p. 274.

[58]Shapiro, p. 30.

[59]Ibid., p. 31.

woman without problems. Instead, she depicts the credible model of an active woman working to find solutions.

By introducing strong female role models in Burning Questions, Shulman also helps to develop androgyny. After several years of failing to achieve a sense of belonging in Greenwich Village, Zane marries, no more willingly than Sasha, seeing marriage as at best a defection. Zane briefly describes her wedding, then vows to keep her husband Ricky's personality out of her story, since "This is my story, not his," and "For the purposes of this history, any husband will do."[60] Shulman proceeds through Zane, to spin woman's version of the tale, concluding philosophically:

> But at least for some of us our lives had improved. We lucky ones spoke up now sometimes and fought back when they called us names—and that was worth a lot. And some of the mothers were no longer all alone. Now when you lost your job, when they cut back your day care, struck down your maternity benefits or took away your seniority or denied your appeal or phased out your function or negated their affirmative action, you were likelier than before to have someone understanding to talk to. If things got bad enough, you might seek refuge in a crisis center for rape victims, an abortion counselor on campus, a woman's commune for community, a neighborhood center for support, a halfway house for battered wives. Halfway but better than no way.[61]

---

[60]Shulman, Questions, pp. 131-32.

[61]Ibid., p. 356.

III. LISA ALTHER

Kin-Flicks

Lisa Alther mingles past and present to tell the story of Ginny Babcock. The chapters which detail Ginny's attendance at her mother's deathbed are written from the third person, omniscient point of view. In alternating chapters, Ginny herself is the narrator, as she spins back into the past. This narrative style provides contrast not only of past with present but also of Ginny's attitudes with those of her mother. Another effect of Alther's style, described by Bonnie Hoover Braendlin, is that,

> . . .through the establishment of multiple viewpoints and juxtaposed moods of humor and pathos that engender irony and ambiguity, Alther creates an alienation device that simultaneously elicits reader sympathy and discourages direct identification with the characters.[62]

Alther provides in Kin-Flicks a forum for description of some of the same issues presented in Shulman's novels. Significant in every woman's life and standard in the feminist novel is the heroine's recollection of menarche. Ginny is an athletic young woman who comes of age in the South. Although she had previously suspected that her days as left tackle were numbered, she was startled and frightened by the event she recalls as:

> . . . the messy morning my first menstrual period began. My family may have been into death in a big way, but they definitely weren't into sex. So unprepared was I for this deluge that I assumed that I had dislodged some vital organ during football practice the previous afternoon and was hemmorhaging to death. Blushing and stammering and averting her eyes to Great-great-aunt Hattie's epitaph on the wall, Mother assured me that what was happening was indeed horrible—but quite normal. That bleeding like a stuck pig every month was the price exacted for being allowed to scrub some man's toilet bowl every week.[63]

---

[62]Bonnie Hoover Braendlin, "Lisa Alther's Kinflicks," in Gender and Literary Voice, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980), pp. 169-70.

[63]Lisa Alther, Kin-Flicks (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1975; Signet, 1977), pp. 31-32.

Thus arriving at womanhood, Ginny exchanges her shoulder pads for a flag twirler's uniform. She aptly describes her days of dating Hullsport High's star athlete Joe Bob Sparks as a time when she carefully walked "the knife's edge of respectability";[64] and when she finally does allow her defenses to be penetrated by hood Clem Cloyd, she, like Sasha, describes the event as anticlimactic:

> "You mean that's it?" I asked with dismay. It hadn't been unpleasant, except for the first pain, but I couldn't exactly view it as the culmination of womanhood. Frankly, the rupturing of my maidenhead had just about as much meaning as the breaking of a paper Saniband on a motel toilet.[65]

Using Kin-Flicks as a forum, Alther describes situations unique to woman.

The function of consciousness-raising is also achieved by Alther's portrayal of female experience. According to Braendlin, "By depicting woman's choice of liberation over enslavement, as a dilemma involving autonomy over against nurturance, Alther echoes the central conflict of most fiction written by women."[66] Using Ginny as an example, Braendlin elaborates upon woman's predicament, acceptance of the role assigned by others or insistence upon determining her own identity.[67] Except for living with her lesbian lover Eddie on a Vermont subsistence farm, Ginny has relied upon others to shape her identity; and upon Eddie's death, Ginny flees eagerly into the refuge of marriage to local snowmobile and insurance salesman Ira Bliss. Initially, Ginny thrives on her structured existence with Ira. She feels emotionally exhausted, unable to be distracted by passion—while Ira makes love to her, she plans tomorrow's dinner menu. Blissfully pregnant, Ginny concludes that motherhood is her destiny; and,

---

[64]Alther, Kin-Flicks, p. 59.

[65]Ibid., p. 130.

[66]Braendlin, p. 169.

[67]Ibid., pp. 165-66.

for the next two years, she conforms to society's expectations. Under the sponsorship of Ira's sister Angela, she travels the Tupperware circuit of Stark's Bog, her life completed by the existence of her daughter, Wendy. But when Ira, with the approval of both sets of parents, scientifically approaches the conception of a son, the rebel surfaces in Ginny. The routine she once loved becomes an imprisonment, and she lets Ira's shirts mould in the automatic washer. When Ira returns from his annual two-week stint with the National Guard, Ginny is in the arms of a Viet Nam deserter, attempting the maithuna, ritual coition. Driven at shotgun point from husband, home and child, Ginny flies to the bedside of her hospitalized mother, who is herself in the process of realizing that all her life she has allowed others to delineate her role. Given the grand tour by her high school boyfriend's pregnant wife, Ginny observes their houseful of Harvest Gold appliances with complimentary yellow accessories and finds herself yet undecided between freedom and domesticity:

> In fact, Ginny at the moment was awash with relief, thinking, "This could have been me, my house, my life." On the other hand, there was a certain appeal to it all. She had to own up to it. Part of her secretly longer to be immersed in such issues as, "Are the dishes in the dishwasher clean or dirty?"[68]

Alther meets Register's prerequisite of consciousness-raising in Kin-Flicks through her presentation of this identity conflict, which Braendlin views as central and universal to women's lives and women's literature.

Ginny seeks to discern how other women deal with the conflicting demands to nurture others and to fulfill self; in this way, Alther develops the sense of sisterhood among women. Attending Worthley College, freshman Ginny sinks deeply into philosophical doldrums. She is rescued by another student, her Northern, liberal adversary, Eddie (Edna) Holzer, who becomes her lover. They

---

[68] Alther, Kin-Flicks, p. 103.

leave school to set up housekeeping together. For awhile, Ginny defines her life by this relationship; she is "officially a 'lesbian'".[69] Like Zane, Ginny does not adopt a homosexual lifestyle; instead she is attracted to Ira Bliss, an attraction that precipitates Eddie's foolhardy death. The next woman from whom Ginny requests advice is her sister-in-law Angela, whose answer to discontent is to have yet another baby. Alther best develops the feeling of sisterhood through the juxtaposition of Ginny's attitudes with those of Mrs. Babcock. During Mrs. Babcock's final illness and Ginny's bedside vigil, each woman is in the process of examining her life to date. Ginny has avoided telling her mother that she has left Ira and Wendy, partly because she fears such news might cause Mrs. Babcock to suffer a fatal cerebral hemorrhage, and partly because she is confident that she can correctly predict her mother's insistence on Ginny's overriding obligation to sacrifice her own desires in favor of family and responsibility; however, Mrs. Babcock has already correctly surmised her daughter's situation and introduces the topic for discussion herself. As Ginny begs for advice, Mrs. Babcock recalls her own "Tired Years," when she had fled to her mother's house for solace. Having received and obeyed the admonition that she must do her duty, Mrs. Babcock now weighs the situation carefully:

> Besides, what if Ginny's duty to Ira and Wendy didn't happen to coincide with her duty to herself, as it was possible that Mrs. Babcock's might not have during the Tired Years? And who was to know that but Ginny herself? Parents expect too much of children; it was unfair to use them, as she now recognized she herself had been used, to fulfill parental ambitions or philosophies.
>
> "I don't know what you should do, Ginny," she replied finally, with enormous difficulty. "You must do as you think best."[70]

Mrs. Babcock verbalizes their new awareness of sisterhood, "Ginny dear, I'm

---

[69]Alther, Kin-Flicks, p. 273.

[70]Ibid., pp. 430-31.

afraid that, underneath it all, you and I are more alike than either of us would care to admit."[71] Braendlin describes Mrs. Babcock's admission as a release;[72] Pearson and Pope also feel that "Ginny is freed when her mother changes from captor to rescuer . . ., changing her mind about what constitutes healthy, responsible, female behavior."[73] Kin-Flicks enhances the feeling of sisterhood through the interaction of Ginny and Mrs. Babcock. Ginny casts about, seeking advice from other females, her Worthley professor and mentor, Miss Head, Eddie, Angela, and finally, her mother. Mrs. Babcock, sentenced by her mother's reproach to a life of tiresome selflessness, displays true sisterhood when she refuses to decide Ginny's fate for her.

The relationship of Ginny and her mother is also relevant to the presentation of female role models in Kin-Flicks. Although she will not influence Ginny by advising her, Mrs. Babcock cannot avoid serving as a role model. She has become "Ginny's mirror—the self Ginny is to become if she goes back to Ira and her child."[74] Braendlin views Ginny's existential lifestyle as "the new woman's option for a new life."[75] From Braendlin's point of view, Alther's characterization of Ginny provides a positive existential role model, who

> . . . signals a desire to reaffirm her ties with humanity, but on a new level of self-reliance: she cannot predict where she is going

---

[71]Alther, Kin-Flicks, p. 429.

[72]Braendlin, p. 167.

[73]Pearson and Pope, p. 100.

[74]Ibid., p. 98.

[75]Braendlin, p. 161.

> (she might even eventually reclaim her daughter), but she courageously sets out to pursue existential freedom and responsibility, no matter how painful, bitter or confusing such an existence may be.[76]

Pearson and Pope have also analyzed Ginny's early years as a series of Hegelian theses and antitheses, and they, too, believe that Ginny is, finally, a positive role model:

> The hero departs with a humble, yet confident stance. She recognizes that she can live without road maps, without sure knowledge of where she is going or what she will do. She sees, sometimes only faintly in the beginning of the journey, that the culture's dualistic definitions are false and that there is something inherently comic about the inexplicable mystery of existence.[77]

Ginny Babcock Bliss provides a role model who is willing to take extreme measures in order to live or die by her current convictions. She is active, not passive, and she has learned the necessity of defining her role from within. Ever the dilettante, Ginny fails to successfully escape her dilemma by drowning or shooting herself. Ousted from Ira's house, newly orphaned, she heads bravely for no planned destination on the last page of Kin-Flicks.

Ginny, as an adventurous role model, helps to achieve androgyny by providing woman's version of the bildungsroman, a myth of the female psyche which Annis Pratt feels is parallel to, but distinct from, the traditional male bildungsroman.[78] Braendlin describes Alther's narrative style as a juxtaposition of "picaresque and confessional modes."[79] As archetypal heroine, Ginny undergoes

---

[76]Braendlin, p. 169.

[77]Pearson and Pope, p. 100.

[78]Pratt, p. 877.

[79]Braendlin, p. 169.

many tribulations before obtaining from Mrs. Babcock the boon of freedom to do what she thinks best.

The five elements Register listed are all to be found in Lisa Alther's Kin-Flicks. As a picaresque novel, Kin-Flicks supplements the existing tradition of the male bildungsroman. Ginny presents a determined role model. Alther provides a forum, and her characterizations of Ginny and Mrs. Babcock contrast to serve the purpose of consciousness-raising. Sisterhood is strengthened as Ginny and her mother begin to talk openly and honestly with each other.

Original Sins

In her second novel, Original Sins, Alther develops from childhood to early adulthood five main characters, three of whom are male. Sisters Emily and Sally Prince, brothers Raymond and Jed Tatro, and Donny Tatro, grandson of the Princes' black maid Ruby, are born circa 1950 and raised in Newland, Tennessee. (As descendants of Tatro slaves, Ruby and Donny bear the same surname as Raymond and Jed.) The first chapters detail life under their respective parents' roofs. Although the five children gather on the branches of the weeping beech Castle Tree to play, they disperse at nightfall to diverse neighborhoods and lifestyles. Emily and Sally, whose grandfather opened the textile mill, Newland's sole industry, return to a beautiful, chandeliered home. Raymond and Jed's father is a loyal employee of Benson Mill; they live near other textile workers in the Mill Village. Donny shares with his grandmother a shabby, kerosene-heated apartment in Pine Woods, Newland's black community. Attractive and athletic, Jed and Sally conform to Newland's expectations, while Raymond and Emily are sensitive, introspective misfits. Donny has been carefully conditioned by his grandmother Ruby to work hard and hide his problems from white folks with a smile and a ready answer that he is just fine. As the five young people go their separate ways into adulthood, Alther names each remaining

chapter after the character whose actions and thoughts it contains, using a third person, limited omnsicient pont of view in each of these chapters, so that the actions are described from the perspective of the character whose history is then being advanced.

Through the five main characters, female and male, black and white, rich and poor, Alther presents a composite picture of the American South. Androgyny is thus the overriding characteristic of Original Sins. As such, it broadens the application of Register's other four criteria. Heilbrun makes a distinction between androgynous and feminist novels, emphasizing

> . . . the necessity and difficult restraint of not confusing androgyny with feminism. The confusion is almost inevitable because the anti-androgynous temper against which the great novels were written is also the temper against which the fights for women's rights raged. Obviously, in an age of great sexual polarization . . ., the androgynous impulse and the feminist impulse must appear, or even be, for a time identical. Yet feminist novels may perhaps be distinguished from androgynous novels in at least one way: in androgynous novels, the reader identifies with the male and female characters equally; in feminist novels, only with the female hero.[80]

Alther does not demonstrate sympathy for Ginny Babcock's boyfriend Joe Bob Sparks or husband, Ira Bliss, who are merely male caricatures seen through Ginny, the first-person narrator; but her treatment of Jed and Raymond Tatro and Donny Tatro is more perceptive.

Original Sins provides an androgynous forum. Raymond, a stamp collecter and chess player, is hurt and baffled by the attention lavished on his pugnacious, athletic brother. Raymond is aptly branded, even by himself, a "quare turn . . . someone who wasn't content just to live life, but who insisted on trying to understand it too. A stance that incapacitated you in the ordinary world of getting and spending."[81] Too liberal for Newland, Raymond remains a "cracker"

---

[80]Heilbrun, p. 58.

[81]Lisa Alther, Original Sins (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1981), p. 491.

to his New York activist friends. Financial need sends Donny to New York. As janitor at Benson Mills, he is the first black employee; however, even though he supplements his mill wages by doing yard work and odd jobs and his wife Rochelle does housework on Tsali Street, they cannot make ends meet. Donny's blood pressure soars, and his frustration erupts into physical violence against Rochelle. Emily is the third of the five to move to New York. When she finds herself short of breath, literally suffocated by her boyfriend Earl's efficient, thorough planning of their future together, Emily mails her acceptance to a New York college. There, like Raymond and Donny, she faces anti-Southern sentiment, finally seeking acceptance in FORWARD, Raymond's radical cohorts. Emily's marriage to FORWARD leader Justin fails when Emily realizes that she is not content to play for Justin and their son Matt the role she names "the Great Ear."[82] In high school, Jed is angered by Raymond's indecision over future plans. Jed, however, does not live up to his own rigid standards of manly forcefulness in his relationship with Sally—

> Either she should put out, or she should make it clear that she wouldn't. As things was, about half the time when she said no, she meant yes. But you never know which was which. Sometimes he suspected she'd like him to just go ahead and do it to her, so she wouldn't have to take responsibility. Girls was like that. They wanted it, but they knew they wasn't supposed to want it, so they tried to get you to force them into it. They got confusing. Sometimes he wished he was a girl and didn't have to be the one to make everything happen. If you was a man, you wasn't supposed to get confused. You was supposed to know all the time what you wanted and how to get it.[83]

Accidental pregnancy rushes Sally and Jed into marriage during their senior year of high school. Initially, Sally, like Ginny, is content to be the Great Ear, copying recipes and consulting women's magazines in her diligent attempt to

---

[82]Alther, Original Sins, p. 399.

[83]Ibid., pp. 44-45.

cater to Jed's every whim, both sexual and domestic. Finally, however, even Sally surrenders to frustration, realizing she cannot please Jed, who does not himself understand his caprice. Upon this realization, Sally seeks at first to convert her feeling of anger into tears. Failing, she decides to fulfill her own needs. Her imagination and skill with kitchen crafts bring her local fame, money of her own, and a busy schedule which leaves her little time for Jed and the children. Having been trained to consider only duties to others, Sally does not adeptly combine home with career. She alienates both Jed and the friends who gave her fame. Alther provides a forum for each of the Five, so that a variety of issues is presented.

Register's requirement of consciousness-raising is also broader in scope in Alther's androgynous second novel. When Raymond decides to glory in his Southern heritage, he returns to farm his grandfather's land. Attempting to raise the regional consciousness of his Tatro Cove relatives, he discovers them to be more interested in obtaining color television sets than in preserving mountain folkways. In New York, Donny sheds the label "farmer" only when he and his street-wise friend Leon join a cell of black activists. Like Raymond, Donny tries to instill pride in heritage; but neither Ruby nor Rochelle comprehends his newly-adopted militancy, and his children are unwilling participants whom he drags to the breakfast program and black history courses at the new storefront community center. When Emily becomes aware of her malaise, she turns increasingly to her women's group and eventually to Raymond's first love, Maria. Emily has found a niche for herself and seeks to help other women. Sally gives up on pleasing Jed, and seems incapable of pleasing herself. She requires constant reassurance and is offended by Emily's consciousness-raising efforts on her behalf. Suddenly widowed, Sally has neither career nor husband. Left with two small children and a drawer of payment books, she comforts herself with the notion

of granting a final interview, "'Portrait of a Bereaved Wife.'"[84] Unlike Joe Bob Sparks and Ira Bliss, who are seen only from Ginny's frequently antagonistic point of view, poor, swaggering Jed is shown as deserving of sympathy. He is an anachronism. Jed remains unable to reconcile his desire for a woman who is wanton in bed with his requirement that his wife, the mother of his children, must be pure and devoid of sexual longings. He wants Sally to be both virginal and seductive. This conflict proves fatal. Jed is driving his pickup truck with Betty (Boobs) Osborne the night of his accident because Sally has despaired of ever understanding his needs and has immersed herself in her own interests, leaving Jed feeling neglected; he is with Betty because he desires her easy sexuality. Alther deals with the consciousness-raising issues of heritage, race and sex in Original Sins.

The criterion of sisterhood is expanded by Alther's Original Sins to include Donny's sense of black brotherhood and Raymond's futile pride in his mountain lineage. As Emily's sister, Sally sets the example of young wife and mother which influences Emily to flee Newland. Active in a woman's organization, Emily, like Ginny, has a female lover. Emily, however, settles into a lesbian lifestyle, attending Jed's funeral in suit and tie. The early sense of kinship shared by the Five is dispelled in adulthood as Raymond, Donny and Emily look to other groups for an extension of identity.

The Five serve as role models in the same fashion as Ginny Babcock. Each has labored to resolve her or his dilemma; and none has found a pat solution. At the close of Original Sins, Emily and Donny vow that their children will inherit a more just world. Raymond is skeptical; Sally is oblivious; and Emily and Donny's optimism is undermined by the fact that their offspring, white and black,

---

[84]Alther, Original Sins, p. 585.

are perched on the limbs of the Castle Tree where the Five first formulated their own grandiose plans for adulthood. The inability of these characters to resolve complex societal dilemmas is in accord with Register's emphasis on credibility and authenticity.

Alther's novel Kin-Flicks meets each of Register's five standards for feminist-approved fiction, strengthening especially woman's sense of sisterhood. Kin-Flicks is androgynous in detailing woman's life through both Ginny and Mrs. Babcock. In Original Sins, androgyny is achieved. Black culture is examined; Women's Liberation is scrutinized. Traditional male attitudes are demonstrated to be a disadvantage, limiting and narrowing man's existence as well as woman's.

IV. MARILYN FRENCH

The Women's Room

Anne Mickelson observes that Marilyn French is of an older generation than many feminist writers. French's purpose in writing The Women's Room is, according to Mickelson, "to prove through her narrator, who turns out to be Mira, why she is angry and why every woman needs to be angry."[85] Mickelson describes French as a "writer using fiction as a vehicle for ideas."[86] She compares Women's Room to D.H. Lawrence's Women in Love and characterizes French's style as "long and discursive, in the manner of the nineteenth century novel."[87]

Like Shulman, French uses her novel as a forum for women; and many of the same issues appear. Mira's youthful training is reminiscent of Sasha's memoir:

> At home, Mrs. Ward taught her not to cross her legs, not to climb trees with boys, not to play tag in the alley, not to speak in a raised voice, not to wear more than three pieces of jewelry at a time and never to mix gold and silver. When these lessons had been learned, she considered Mira "finished."[88]

French also airs the problems of suburban marriage through Mira and Norm and their circle of friends. Mickelson finds her too pessimistic on this subject;[89] Shapiro, however, admires the verisimilitude of her portrayals:

> But it is marriage that fails even more resoundingly than sex in these novels. In "The Women's Room" it fails over and over

---

[85]Mickelson, pp. 206, 208.

[86]Ibid., p. 208.

[87]Ibid., pp. 206, 207.

[88]Marilyn French, The Women's Room (Summit Books, 1977; New York: Jove/HBJ, 1978), p. 20.

[89]Mickelson, p. 215.

> again. . . . In "Meyersville," the locale of most of the book's early scenes, a stratum of life is masterfully recreated. The sharply focused picture that develops is totally true, even if in actual life as one observes it marriage does not inevitably end in ruins.[90]

Mira's workload as a mother is meticulously detailed, including, of course, her daily schedule. Mother of two before the convenience of the automatic washer, Mira is slave to a grueling schedule carefully recorded by French; the tasks she needs to accomplish before noon fill two pages. Derived from a corrected, consciousness-raised door of a Harvard restroom where Mira seeks refuge during her first days, the title of this novel indicates that it will serve as a forum wherein female characters may speak as women regarding their experience as ladies.

Names are also significant in relation to the consciousness-raising content of The Women's Room. Mira's husband Norm "is, as his name implies, the norm."[91] In her narrative, Mira, like Zane, strives to keep her husband faceless; this is to be her forum, not his. Pearson and Pope assess importance to Mira's name also:

> The conventional, preheroic woman lives in the mirror of male opinion. As Marilyn French points out in her discussion of fairyland in The Women's Room, although other women embody images of inappropriate or ideal womanhood, those images are all male-defined. French's protagonst, Mira, as her name implies, "lived by her mirror as much as the Queen in Snow White. A lot of us did: we absorbed and believed the things people said about us. . . . I believed Philip Wylie when he said mothers were a generation of vipers, and I swore never, never to act that way. I believed Sigmund's 'anatomy is destiny' and tried to develop a sympathetic, responsive nature."[92]

Mira, like Ginny, flees into the sanctuary of marriage. Instead, however, she

---

[90]Shapiro, p. 30.

[91]Pearson and Pope, p. 136.

[92]Ibid., p. 121.

finds herself oppressively sheltered. Norm protects her from the danger of rape she faced as no man's chosen; he also protects her from the dangers of registering in graduate school and learning to drive the family car. When Norm's personally guaranteed method of contraception, withdrawal, fails to protect Mira from pregnancy, he blames Mira for their predicament. Seated in her rocker, Mira suddenly understands that, in seeking a haven, "all she had done was to let the enemy into her house, let him into her body, he was growing there now."[93] French's consciousness-raising content does, as Mickelson claims, demonstrate woman's anger.

By venting female rage, The Women's Room contributes to androgyny in a manner similar to that of Memoirs of An Ex-Prom Queen. Mira, like Sasha and Ginny, is surprised by the onset of her first menstrual period. Thanks to Mrs. Ward and a neighbor, Mrs. Mittlow, Mira views menstruation as yet another example of female servitude:

> Women always whispered about it, for men, she understood, were not subject to such things. They did not have the same poisons in them, Mrs. Mittlow had said. Mira's mother said, "Oh, Doris," but Mrs. Mittlow was insistent. The priest had told her, she said. So men remained in charge of their bodies; they were not invaded by painful and disgusting and bloody events they could not control. . . . That was why they were conquerors. Women were victims by nature.[94]

The topic of rape appears in The Women's Room and other feminist novels, supplementing the traditional male viewpoint on the issue. At nineteen, Mira barely escapes gang rape when her date Lanny deserts her in a bar. While Mickelson claims that this incident is now trite,[95] Cecile Shaprio shows how French uses the subject of rape as an integral part of her novel's structure:

---

[93]French, Women's Room, p. 62.

[94]Ibid., p. 34.

[95]Mickelson, p. 213.

> Rape frames the action of "The Women's Room." The first, a deflected gang rape presented quickly and quietly, allows the reader to wonder if Mira is not perhaps a bit neurotic to permit the experience to push her into a "safe" marriage; the second, which reverberates toward the end of the novel, is highlighted, taut with suspense and convincingly detailed. The victim is the daughter of Mira's close friend, about the same age as Mira when her rape was averted. Both actually and symbolically, it destroys the girl, her mother, and the social fabric that had bound their circle of friends together.[96]

French's portrayal of men is perhaps equivalent to the treatment women have traditionally received in male fiction. This aspect of Women's Room, too, is defended by Shapiro:

> In Meyersville the husbands are one or several of the following: unfaithful, impotent, fools, hypocrites, phonies, philanderers, improvident, lecherous, selfish, lazy, insensitive or bullies. This seemingly one-sided picture is convincing in context because French has captured real specimens and mounted them in a diorama that encourages readers to examine them. . . .[97]

Through Mira, French describes women and situations peculiar to them. She also depicts men in relation to women. Thus, in making males the second sex, she approaches Register's standard of androgyny.

The development of sisterly feelings among women is an important aspect of The Women's Room. In the maternity ward, Mira first shares the feeling of camaraderie with other mothers which is to sustain her through the next years. Elizabeth Janeway comments that whereas, in masculine works, significance is attached to woman's loss of virginity, in women's writing, woman's passage from daughter to mother is essential.[98] Listening to the other mothers in the hospital laugh at husbandly eccentricities, knowing she had joined their sorority, Mira

---

[96]Shapiro, p. 29.

[97]Ibid., p. 30.

[98]Janeway, p. 385.

"felt she had arrived, finally, at womanhood."[99] Mira and Norm move to the suburbs when their second son is born. In Meyersville, Mira continues to draw strength from her circle of female friends, sharing coffee and chortling over their respective husbands' inadequacies. There is, from time to time, an edge to the women's voices; the laughter sometimes verges on hysteria, as troubles threaten to overwhelm. In her essay, "The Laughter of Maidens, the Cackle of Matriarchs: Notes on the Collision Between Comedy and Feminism," Judith Wilt examines Mira's existence in Meyersville:

> Given the nature of the world feminism seeks to describe and change, the collision seems inevitable. An arresting series of observations in The Women's Room just before suburban life becomes unendurable and gives way to radical graduate student life, makes the terms of the collision clear. The suburban wife-mothers gather daily in irregular groups to support and console each other and to cry out against those boundaries of life—the husband, the children, the home. But the ritual is comedy, the mode is overwhelmed humor . . .[100]

As Wilt suggests, the gatherings in suburban kitchens provide a temporary stopgap.[101] One by one, Mira's Meyersville comrades stop laughing and succumb to family problems. When Norm files for divorce, receiving custody of the two boys, Mira seeks the education Norm had denied her years before. She is one of the first women admitted to Harvard. Again Mira's circle of female friends brings support and encouragement, in the one portion of the novel which Mickelson finds satisfactory; "the Harvard section of the book leaves us with hope that some women can change through experience and crisis, and by talking to other

---

[99]French, Women's Room, p. 82.

[100]Judith Wilt, "The Laughter of Maidens, the Cackle of Matriarchs: Notes on the Collision Between Comedy and Feminism," in Genderand Literary Voice, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980), p. 173.

[101]Ibid., p. 174.

women."[102] In feminist fiction, sexual involvement is often a consequence of women's newly-enjoyed closeness; and Mira, too, realizing that her loyal friends have always been women, becomes curious about lesbian relationships. While her friend Iso assures Mira that she is attractive and desirable to her, Iso is sensitive to the fact that Mira is not quite ready to violate the same-sex taboo. Two other women in their group of friends, Kyla and Clarissa, become Iso's lovers, but Iso is the only one who remains lesbian. (Shapiro observes that, at the end of The Women's Room, Iso is the only character sexually content.[103]) The rape of Val's daughter destroys the circle of Mira's friends, and Mira is finally alone. She continues, however, to hear the voices of the friends who have been her sisters as she wanders along the beach.

Through Mira's two lifestyles, suburban wife and mother in Meyersville and Harvard graduate student, French contrasts the traditional female role with new opportunities available to women. As Norm's medical practice prospered, he moved his family to an immense, beautiful home in the more elite suburb of Beau Reve. Away from her beleaguered Meyersville friends, Mira was at last feeling victorious:

> She knew what was right for her and she had done it. She had hedged her bet. She had not understood the rules when she started playing, but she had managed to play right. It must have been feel. All her intelligence, that brilliance she presently applied to file cards listing windows to be washed, had not in fact gone to waste. In a world where women were victims, she was surviving on the winning side. She had a magnificent house, two fine boys, beautiful clothes.[104]

Mira's clean, well-ordered lifestyle is ended the night Norm returns home even later than usual to tell Mira he wants a divorce. Her settlement request astounds

---

[102]Mickelson, p. 218.

[103]Shapiro, p. 30.

[104]French, Women's Room, pp. 301-02.

both divorce lawyers; she submits a bill for the various services, skilled and menial, which she has faithfully performed during all the years of their marriage. Mira is suicidal when her carefully structured world collapses. She slashes her wrists one night but is found by a female friend whom she has similarly rescued. Attempted suicide classifies Mira an unfit mother, and Norm receives custody of their two sons. At Harvard, when Mira's younger lover, Ben, who has seemed to consider her his peer, assumes without asking that Mira will gladly abandon her own post-graduate work to follow his career to Lianu, Africa, and bear his child, Mira refuses to sacrifice her own goals. At the end of The Women's Room, Mira reveals herself as narrator, having penned her experience during the summer, before returning to again teach college composition to uninterested freshmen. Again Mickelson and Shapiro are in opposition. Mickelson focuses on the negative aspect of Mira's fate; "the author's strong presence leaves no doubt that the older woman is no better off after her break for freedom than she was in the circle of her oppressive marriage."[105] Shapiro also recognizes the tragic tone of Mira's story but notes her musing on personal value of her Harvard Ph.D.: "'I am a good scholar, and in a different market, I could have done decent work; but in this one it seems hopeless. Maybe I'll do it anyway, just for myself.'"[106] When Mira's existence within traditional roles is taken from her, she creates a new role, which she refuses to surrender.

French creates in The Women's Room an effective forum for consciousness-raising. She emphasizes the development of sisterhood as a source of strength. The telling of the suburban's housewife's story supplements traditional male

---

[105]Mickelson, p. 218.

[106]Shapiro, p. 31.

fiction; and as a student and career woman, Mira provides a positive, if not joyous, role model.

The Bleeding Heart

In 1980, Marilyn French published her second novel, The Bleeding Heart. The setting is England, where Dolores Durer is doing research on a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and where Victor Morrissey, Vice President of Development for IMO, comes to establish a branch office. Both know at the beginning of their relationsip that it is to last only a year, the duration of each one's stay in Oxford. Dolores is about Mira's age and is also a college professor; Dolores is a published author whose name is used to attract students.

Although The Bleeding Heart does not emphasize the development of sisterhood so strongly as does The Women's Room, Dolores and Mira express parallel sentiments regarding the sexes. Both admit to a generalized bigotry against men and bias in favor of women. Mira explains,

> I tell people at once, to warn them, that I suffer from deformation of character. But the truth is I am sick unto death of four thousand years of males telling me how rotten my sex is. Especially it makes me sick when I look around and see such rotten men and such magnificent women, all of whom have a sneaking suspicion that the four thousand years of remarks are correct.[107]

Caught in a sweeping generalization about men who mouth general criticism of women, Dolores echoes an apology, "'I suffer from deformation of character. It's a result of my past. I lost a fin in the war and now I swim at a list.'"[108] Whereas Mira works toward developing a bias in favor of woman's viewpoint,

---

107French, Women's Room, p. 290.

108Marilyn French, The Bleeding Heart (Summit Books, 1980; Ballantine Books, 1981), p. 5.

Dolores works beyond this character deformation she acknowledges early in the novel.

Through Dolores' struggles to understand Victor's feelings, French progresses toward androgyny. The thoughts and feelings of Dolores are reflected in French's third-person, limited omniscient narrative; and Victor's deepest emotions are verbalized by him to Dolores. Unlike Norm, Mira's enemy, Victor becomes Dolores' trusted friend and lover in French's more androgynous second novel. Because of their age, prior experience, and contrasting politics, Dolores and Victor's relationship is turbulent. Dolores shatters their breakfast dishes when Victor departs brusquely, never looking back, to keep a business appointment the morning after their first tryst. Her thoughts echo those of pregnant Mira, who felt she had embraced her captor, "You let him in, you opened the door, you stupid. How could you let yourself forget that they never fail to hurt you?"[109] Confronted, Victor analyzes his action in fleeing like Lot to his business meeting: "'I was feeling—I have to get myself together and get out of here, right now, fast. If I don't I'll never leave. I'll stay and stay and turn into one of the pieces of furniture.'"[110] Because both female and male viewpoints are expressed, French meets in Bleeding Heart Register's requirement that feminist-approved fiction must help to bring about androgyny.

Register also recommends that feminist fiction act as a forum for women. Because The Bleeding Heart is a more androgynous novel than The Women's Room, it presents a forum for both men and women. The intimacy of Victor and Dolores demands that they share the tragedies each has known. Dolores sometimes finds herself siding with Victor's wife Edith as the tale of their

---

[109]French, Bleeding Heart, p. 43.

[110]French, Ibid., p. 67.

loveless marriage unfolds. As Dolores, in turn, relates her past, Victor adds to it a male perspective. Victor describes his family life one day, how Edith and the children fit into his busy schedule "like a wedge of pie", permanent, if not the largest piece.[111] Realizing her status, Edith had once moved with the children to her parents' Scarsdale apartment for three weeks. She returned, defining the terms under which their marriage would continue: "'At any rate I decided that the children need a father, and that I would do my duty. And so I came back. And I will keep my bargain.'"[112] This agreement lasted until the horrible night Edith saw Victor dining with his current mistress at a restaurant he had recommended to Edith and her friends. In the ensuing scene, Victor attempted to rationalize his own guilt by informing Edith that it had been common knowledge that her own adored father, too, had supported a mistress for years. Edith, in retaliation, cracked the spine of Victor's treasured 1605 (first) edition of Bacon's Advancement of Learning, then dashed from the house and drove away recklessly, perhaps suicidally, crashing into a concrete retaining wall. The accident left her legless, helpless, sealing Victor into their bargain forever. Dolores senses Victor's suffering; but she fears at times that he will make her his captive, too. For nearly a month after his revelation, Dolores and Victor avoid each other. Then Dolores shares her saddest secret with Victor. She describes her nightmare marriage to bad-tempered Anthony, who committed suicide when Dolores insisted on divorce. Then she tells of Elspeth, the child she had never mentioned. Anthony had turned his rancor from son Tony and daughter Sydney toward Elspeth when menstruation made manifest her womanhood. At first, Elspeth had seemed relieved when her father moved out. He, however, carefully engineered his

---

111French, Bleeding Heart, p. 237.

112Ibid., p. 238.

suicide so that twelve-year-old Elspeth would be the one to smell the fumes and find him in the closed garage. When Dolores realized that she was losing Elspeth to drugs and footloose companions, all disciplinary measures failed. She "resigned" as Elspeth's mother.[113] Elspeth ran away. Less than a week later, Dolores and her young lover Jack returned from a late evening out to discover Elspeth dead, her method of suicide identical to Anthony's. Acting as forum for each other, both Dolores and Victor begin to comprehend the problems and suffering of the opposite sex.

Comprehension is accompanied by consciousness-raising, another of Register's criteria. Victor's explanation that he fled to his business meeting in fear of becoming a fixture in Dolores' apartment results in the following interchange, typical of their bittersweet affair:

> "Oh God. The libber speaks." He slid down on his pillow.
>
> "Feminist, please." She poked his arm. "What you're doing is turning me into Circe."
>
> He had pulled the sheet up over his head. Only his hand, holding his cigarette, protruded. From under the sheet, a muted voice howled. "How in hell can I turn you into something I never heard of?"
>
> Firm teacher's voice. "That doesn't matter. You know the stereotype even if you don't know the name."
>
> Groan from under the sheet.
>
> "Circe was a goddess who enchanted men to keep them with her. She turned them into pigs."
>
> Sheet thrown off, body up. "And you don't like being Circe?"
>
> "I don't like being <u>seen</u> as Circe."
>
> "Well, I sure as hell don't like being seen as a pig."

---

[113]French, <u>Bleeding Heart</u>, p. 371.

> They laughed then, silly laughter, the kind that comes when it's late and you're tired and you love someone and you can afford to be a child.[114]

The Circe stereotype is central to French's theme of consciousness-raising. Victor is in many ways conventional, wanting Dolores to be available to him, yet fearing he will become her prisoner. Because she has also given him a sensitive character, however, French makes Victor a foil to Dolores' feminist ways.

Self-sufficient and dedicated to her work, Dolores provides a positive role model. Victor is confused and hurt when Dolores refuses to renege on her obligation to return to the States on July 20 to teach a summer school course; in previous experience, only his career has mattered. As the novel closes, they have four days left. Victor is asleep. Watching him, Dolores includes Victor in her description of all humanity as "round plump children, long skinny children, brown and yellow and pale and pink and red and chocolate, all born with the cancer inside, tearing around from clinic to clinic, seeking diagnoses, cure."[115] Dolores had modified, softened, her bigotry through Victor; and Victor is the "scarred man" Mickelson found lacking in The Women's Room.[116]

The Bleeding Heart represents a logical progression from The Women's Room. Dolores is in may ways similar to Mira. She is, however, from the beginning a role model immersed in work of her own. By developing the relationship with Victor, French presents a forum for male and female, thus progressing toward androgyny. Having raised Victor's consciousness, Dolores can afford to see him, finally, as a child, too, a brother.

---

[114]French, Bleeding Heart, p. 67.

[115]Ibid., p. 407.

[116]Mickelson, p. 220.

V. CONCLUSION

Nina Auerbach summarizes the development of feminist fiction and feminist criticism:

> At this point, after a decade, I would say that feminist criticism and the new feminism generally have created less a dogma than a climate of opinion in which women have become widely interesting. Even the domestic minutiae of the traditional woman's world, once scorned as impediments to the aspiring spirit (male or female), have become folk art, tokens of a social history more essential to human reality than the great events of ceremonial "masculine" life.[117]

Critics responded to the interest in feminist fiction by proposing various criteria to be met by feminist authors. Cheri Register's list of five proposed tasks for the feminist author to accomplish takes into account the social and political background which nurtured feminist fiction.

Register's five criteria are all met to varying degrees and in different ways by the six novels, Memoirs of An Ex-Prom Queen, Burning Questions, Kinflicks, Original Sins, The Women's Room, and The Bleeding Heart. Speaking Bitterness brings about consciousness-raising in Memoirs of An Ex-Prom Queen and The Women's Room, where each protagonist at some point regards her life style as the realization of a curse. Sasha is at the hairdresser's, seeking to regain her youth and her husband's passion. She is the dependent, jealous child-wife, a fate she had fled until she embraced Willy. As Norm's wife, Mira is home with the two babies, scrubbing the kitchen floor to the accompaniment of a screaming infant—enacting the very vision which had kept her from marrying her first love Lanny. Sasha is mired in discontent; but Mira attempts to improve her life after Norm divorces her. Janeway feels that the possibility of change is an element of consciousness-raising in feminist fiction:

---

[117]Auerbach, p. 260.

> The ability to look openly at humiliation and degradation, and to testify to the profound emotional confusion that arises when the presence of these emotions is first brought to light, depends on a sense that such a state need not continue. If there is no choice but pain or numbness, the human creature will try to be numb, and shield the pain with self-deprecatory laughter, as we have seen. Even when earlier writers of fiction expressed resentment at the fate of women, it was tempered by awareness that there were few alternatives. Plenty of bad marriages and disoriented wives can be found in novels, but as long as marriage remained a prerequisite for normal female life, it was seen, perforce, as something that woman had to put up with; and the worst and most crippling of its disorders went unmentioned or disguised. When a life without marriage, or without the traditional form of patriarchal marriage, became socially and emotionally feasible, what had been hidden began to emerge.[118]

The existence of alternatives for women is much more apparent in Shulman's second novel, Burning Questions than in Memoirs. From the beginning, Zane looked upon her marriage as a compromise. She did not, like Sasha, remain trapped, but instead remains politically active and availed herself of the option of independence. In Kin-Flicks, the consciousness level of Ginny Babcock Bliss is contrasted with that of her mother. Ginny admits that she is torn between her duty to nurture others and her need to fulfill her own desires. Mrs. Babcock, who has spent her life caring for others, refuses to give the advice which would doom Ginny to the same fate. In Alther's Original Sins and French's The Bleeding Heart, novels which approach androgyny, consciousness-raising also relates to men, seen not as the enemy, but as reasoning, reflecting human beings hurt by their own macho standards. In earlier novels like Memoirs of An Ex-Prom Queen, the function of consciousness-raising is to teach women to Speak Bitterness. Its next function, in works like The Women's Room, Burning Questions and Kin-Flicks, is to increase awareness of woman's bitterness, working toward change. In more androgynous fiction, like Original Sins and The Bleeding Heart, men, too, are seen as victims of sexual stereotype.

---

[118]Janeway, p. 372.

As consciousness-raising increases woman's sense of worth, other women, too, are valued as sisters. Janeway explains,

> The future can best be foreseen by looking at what goes on under our noses, these writers say. Ideas of a different world—and if this literature rages at the past, it is hopeful about the future--tug us toward imagining new systems. Nonetheless, they declare, all our lives remind us that one cannot make bricks without straw or a society without considering who gets meals, cares for children, looks after the old, mourns the dead, and keeps the wheel in motion. In the past and still in the present, these tasks were and are done by ubiquitous, irreplaceable female creatures, loving, marrying or not marrying, earning as well as spending, and always tending to the recurrent, necessary processes that go on below the level of attention and bind communities together.[119]

In her struggle to comprehend her unhappiness, Sasha draws upon Roxanne's strength and unfailing good humor. Shulman's next heroine, Zane, realizes she is one of many restless wives; she joins forces with other women to speak out and then act upon the bitterness welling within. French's Mira forsakes the wifely laughter of suburban kitchens. As a divorcee, she is politicized by her Harvard friends. During her terminal illness, Mrs. Babock and her recalcitrant daughter Ginny face and accept their basic similarity. In Original Sins, Emily Prince is the active feminist who has attempted to effect change in her surroundings. Donny Tatro has united with his militant black brothers. Failing to arouse the regional pride of his mountain cousins, Raymond Tatro has retreated to the safety of his ancestral cabin. At the close of The Bleeding Heart, Dolores has come to regard all adults, female and male, as overgrown, frightened children. Discussing each detail of female existence, novels like Prom Queen help women to develop a sense of sisterhood. The Women's Room and Burning Questions exemplify women strengthening each other. In Kin-Flicks, Alther depicts the reunion of mother and daughter, who realize that both have shared the dilemma

---

[119]Janeway, p. 377.

of serving family or self. In the more androgynous novels, a sense of humankind prevails.

Carolyn Heilbrun emphasizes the need for natural progression from feminism to androgyny, augmented through the literary forum of feminist fiction.[120] Shulman's two novels and The Women's Room, especially, provide a forum for woman's litany of oppression. Alther's Mrs. Babcock, Ginny, Emily and Sally may choose between Speaking Bitterness or listening as the Great Ear. In Original Sins and The Bleeding Heart, the male characters, too, are allowed a forum for their problems. Shulman and French refuse to let male characters dominate Prom Queen, Burning Questions, and The Women's Room, rendering the husbands faceless where necessary. In Kin-Flicks, Ginny's father, boyfriend and husband appear as the antagonists who necessitate the forum. In the more androgynous works, Alther and French create sympathetic males also in search of a forum.

Authentic female role models are demanded by Register. Sasha is a model of honesty, who views her life as a curse fulfilled. Except for telephoning a female friend, Roxanne, she has no solutions. Elizabeth Janeway speaks of those positive role models, for whom

> . . . the old bargain has become impossible. The wives who go back feel themselves to have redefined their identities so completely that the marriage will be taken up at a new point, in a new way. This will include the details of living; it is not simply an abstract aspiration. For these heroines, whether they try to salvage an old relationship or hang on to the new status of woman alone, it is often the strand of dailiness that holds things together.[121]

While Janeway emphasizes the daily patterns which sustain positive roles, Shapiro stresses the importance of the heroine's gainful employment. Shulman's Zane

---

120 Heilbrun, p. 170.

121 Janeway, p. 376.

has left her unhappy marriage and enjoys her teaching career. Alone at the beach, Mira ponders the possibility of scholarly work, just for her own benefit. Ginny Babcock, too, has abandoned her traditional roles, for an uncertain, picaresque future, heroine of the female bildungsroman. In Original Sins, Jed Tatro stubbornly resisted all change in role, dominated by the macho beliefs which precipitate his untimely death. Dolores' commitment to fulfill her teaching contract turns the tables on Victor, who has been accustomed to pliant women. During the decade in which Memoirs of An Ex-Prom Queen, Burning Questions, Kin-Flicks, Original Sins, The Women's Room, and The Bleeding Heart were written, the application of the term androgyny has taken on different meanings. Novels like Prom Queen, Burning Questions, The Women's Room, and Kin-Flicks helped to achieve androgyny by supplementing the traditional, universal body of fiction with details from woman's experience. Heilbrun predicts the appearance of androgynous works; "no one can foretell their form, nor, in all probability, will they be instantaneously recognized when they do appear."[122] More recent novels like Original Sins and The Bleeding Heart meet Register's five criteria for approval by the feminist community. However, because these novels view male needs as equally pressing, they represent, perhaps, the beginning of the androgynous fiction forecast by Heilbrun.

---

[122]Heilbrun, p. 171.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alther, Lisa. Kin-Flicks. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1975; Signet, 1977.

—. Original Sins. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1981.

Auerbach, Nina. "Feminist Criticism Reviewed." In Gender and Literary Voice, pp. 258-268. Edited by Janet Todd. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980.

Braendlin, Bonnie Hoover. "Lis Alther's Kinflicks." In Gender and Literary Voice, pp. 160-71. Edited by Janet Todd. New York: Homes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980.

Cornillon, Susan Koppelman. "The Fiction of Fiction," Images of Women in Fiction. Cited by Cheri Register, "American Feminist Literary Criticm: A Bibliographical Introduction," pp. 1-29. In Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory. Edited by Josephine Donovan. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975.

Donovan, Josephine, ed. Feminist Literary Criticisim: Explorations in Theory. Lexington : The University Press of Kentucky, 1975.

French, Marilyn. The Bleeding Heart. Summit Books, 1980; Ballantine Books, 1981.

—. The Women's Room. Summit Books, 1977; Jove/HBJ, 1978.

Heilbrun, Carolyn. Toward a Recognition of Androgyny. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1964; New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1982.

Holly, Marcia. "Consciousness and Authenticity: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic." In Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory, pp. 38-47. Edited by Josephine Donovan. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975.

Janeway, Elizabeth. "Women's Literature." In Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing, pp. 342-95. Edited by Daniel Hoffman. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1979.

Jong, Erica. Fear of Flying. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973; Signet, 1974.

—. "Writing as a Woman." Bookviews, August 1978, pp. 20-1.

Mickelson, Anne Z. Reaching Out: Sensitivity and Order in Recent American Fiction by Women. Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1979.

Pearson, Carol and Pope, Katherine. The Female Hero in British and American Literature. New York: R.R. Bowker Company, 1981.

Peer, Elizabeth. "Sex and the Woman Writer." Newsweek, May 5, 1975, pp. 70-77.

Pratt, Annis. "The New Feminist Criticism." College English 32 (May 1971): 872-78.

Register, Cheri. "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction." In Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory, pp. 1-29. Edited by Josephine Donovan. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975.

Robinson, Lillian S. "Dwelling in Decencies: Radical Criticism and the Feminist Perspective." College English 32 (May 1971): 879-89.

Schmidt, Dolores Barracano. "The Great American Bitch." College English 32 (May 1971): 900-05.

Shapiro, Cecile. "What Women Want: A Novel Answer to Freud." Bookviews, August 1978, pp. 28-31.

Shulman, Alix Kates. Burning Questions. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1978; Bantam Books, 1979.

—. Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1972; Bantam Books, 1973.

Wilt, Judith. "The Laughter of Maidens, The Cackle of Matriarchs: Notes on the Collision Between Comedy and Feminism." In Gender and Literary Voice, pp. 173-96. Edited by Janet Todd. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980.